

RHODODENDRON CHAPMANII, AN ENDANGERED SPECIES
ON BOTH STATE AND FEDERAL LISTS

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The species of Rhododendron native to Florida are divided into 2 subgenera, subgenus Rhododendron, commonly called rhododendrons, and subgenus Azalea, commonly called azaleas. Chapman's rhododendron, Rhododendron chapmanii Gray, (Fig. 1), endemic to Florida (that is, it grows nowhere else), is our only native rhododendron.



Fig. 1. Chapman's rhododendron, Rhododendron chapmanii
(DPI neg. #702411-5)

Rhododendron chapmanii (sometimes classified as R. minus Michx. var. chapmanii (Gray) Duncan & Pullen) is an attractive evergreen shrub up to around 2 m tall. It produces rose-pink flowers 3 cm long in clusters in the early spring. It is rare and occurs in only 3 areas. In the past Chapman's rhododendron was more widely distributed, but now, because of land clearing, site preparation for pine planting, land drainage, collecting, and other disturbances, it has been reduced to a relatively few remaining plants. The largest population of these plants is in an area near the Gadsden-Liberty County line. A small population remains in Gulf County, and an even smaller (less than 50 plants known) (5,6) disjunct population in Clay County (7).

DESCRIPTION: Evergreen shrub up to 2 m tall, branching relatively open and erect-ascending. Young twigs, petioles, and lower leaf surfaces copiously lepidote scaly, scurfy dotted, upper leaf surface less so. Leaves alternate, elliptic or oval, coriaceous, 1.5-5 cm long, 1-3 cm broad, dark green and sometimes dotted above, brown

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scurfy below, margins entire, revolute, apex rounded to rarely acute, petioles 2-6 mm long. Flower clusters appearing usually before leafy shoots of the season. Pedicels 5-8 mm long; calyx united below, shallowly saucer-shaped, persistent, lobes minute, triangular, ciliate; corolla united below, light pink to rose-pink, tube funnelform, 1-2 cm long, limb 3-4 cm across, lobes ovate to oblong, rounded; stamens 10, filaments glabrous, 2.5 cm long, longer than style; ovary superior, 5-locular, ovules numerous in each locule, style slender, curved, stigma capitate. Capsule about 1 cm long, longitudinally lobed, somewhat urceolate in outline (1,2,3,4).

DISCUSSION: The Florida legislature passed a law repealing and replacing the old plant protection law, Section 865.06, Florida Statutes. This new law, Section 581.185, Florida Statutes, passed in 1978 and revised in 1980 includes R. chapmanii as one of the listed endangered plants. This law prohibits collecting, transporting, or selling the listed endangered plants without a proper permit. The U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service listed R. chapmanii as endangered in 1979 (5,6). This listing affects only commerce or federal or federally funded projects. The two listings together will offer some hope of preventing the extinction of this attractive species.

Chapman's rhododendron is an attractive ornamental shrub for cultivation and is the only species of subgenus Rhododendron satisfactorily adapted to Florida and other areas of the Deep South along the Gulf and southern Atlantic coastal plain. A few nurseries have started propagating it from seed and, although quantities are very limited, legally grown material is available commercially. In no case should plants be removed from the wild.

Many excellent rhododendron hybrids and cultivars derived from other species are available for more northerly areas. Hybridization between Chapman's rhododendron and some of these choice selections might provide a much wider selection of cultivars adapted to Florida. Commercial production from seed of pure R. chapmanii or hybrids of it with other selections should reduce the collecting pressure on these rare, endangered plants.

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